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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S RIGHT IN IRAN ON SLOW DECLINE

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(SBU) Summary: Several Iranian women activists paint a picture of an increasingly restrictive climate for women under President Ahmadinejad, in terms of both joint activities with the West and the legislative and judicial climate. The changes appear designed to be gradual in nature, as opposed to more high profile public harassment of women for their dress, make-up, or male companions. Nonetheless, these activists expressed optimism that Iranian demographics would bring about greater freedoms in the long-term. End summary

Academic View

2.(S) In a February 8 conversation, Dr. Jaleh Shaditalab (please protect), founder of the Women's Studies Center at Tehran University, discussed women's issues in Iran with PolEconChief. The recipient of advanced degrees from U.S. universities prior to the 1979 revolution, Dr. Jaleh Shaditalab is an associate professor in the Social Science Faculty and the founder of the Women's Studies Center at Tehran University. She came to Dubai to apply for a visa to speak at the Woodrow Wilson Center April 7, as well as at Arizona State University.

3.(S) Shaditalab noted some positive changes under the previous administration, but overall disappointment in former President Khatami. Signs of progress included the establishment of the Women's Studies Center at Tehran University and the opening of many women's issues-related NGOs. People were very hopeful, she said, but in the end realized that they had unrealistic expectations. Although Khatami was an intellectual and said the right things, he was still a cleric and part of the regime.

4.(S) Shaditalab reported that since coming into office, Ahmadinejad's government has tried to redirect women's issues to focus primarily on the family. Women's NGOs were under increasing pressure, though she said there has been no concrete action against them yet. She was recently removed as director of the Women's Studies Center when her term ended, whereas customarily her term would have been extended. Under her leadership, the center had many grants from European entities, totaling \$600,000. The new director, however, canceled all projects with foreign partners. Shaditalab also had UN grants on gender-violence projects, which were also canceled, and she said the UN is unsure how to proceed in Iran. She has heard that she has been blacklisted as a consultant on women's projects, and she believes it is because the government fears she might leak information that would end up with the UN's human rights commission.

5.(S) Shaditalab said she used to meet regularly with representatives of the Sixth Majles but never sees anyone from the current Seventh Majles, and that all of its 12 female members are conservatives. The parliament recently contacted her to request a report for use at an upcoming UN conference on women (presumably the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) February 27-March 10), but she declined, referring them instead to the follow-up report to the Beijing Conference prepared by the previous administration. However, they refused to use the old report because it was issued in the name of the reformist government.

6.(S) Despite such backwards steps, Shaditalab said, she is optimistic long-term regarding women's rights in Iran. She said that the youth of Iran today are very smart and will put pressure on the government, noting that 64% of university students are women. Shaditalab also said it was significant that 28% of women in Tehran and 15% in rural areas are listed as unemployed, explaining that only those who say they are seeking employment are counted in these statistics. She said it was a new phenomenon that so many women, particularly in rural areas, would declare themselves to be seeking employment.

NGO View

7.(C) Three representatives from Iranian women NGOs came to the consulate February 15 to apply for visas to go to the CSW. It was noteworthy that the most talkative of the three, who said she represents a new NGO, was openly critical of Iranian government backsliding in terms of women's issues. She said that of the 41 pieces of women-related legislation passed by the previous Majles, the Guardians Council had rejected 20 of them. While Iran has hundreds of women's NGOs, most are local; she complained of the lack of a national organization for women. When asked about regional interaction between women's groups, she mentioned numerous exchanges with Afghan women. She said in some respects, Afghanistan was more progressive than Iran, given

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the fact that unlike Iran, it now had women ministers.

Businesswoman's View

8.(S) In a separate conversation, another Iranian women's rights activist also expressed pessimism regarding the effect Ahmadinejad will have on women's issues in Iran. Leila Bokaie (please protect) applied for a visa February 13 to attend the World Bank's Women in the Middle East Roundtable, representing businesswomen in Iran. She told PolEconOff that she used to work for the government, but two years ago participated in a government 'buyout' program and now works in the private sector. She is also involved in "White Home", a women's club designed to improve the status of women at work. She described the role of women in the workplace across the world as extremely unequal -- even in the U.S. -- but in Iran, she said it was particularly poor.

9.(S) Bokaie believes the deterioration of women's rights under the new president will not be the result of a single event, but rather a slow buildup of decisions over the next three years or so. As an example, she said she believes conservative judges are feeling increasingly empowered to act against women in cases such as divorce, even when the facts favor the wife's case.

Comment

10.(S) We have not heard reports of any high-profile crackdown on women in obvious ways, such as a dramatic up-tick in the harassment of women in public for their dress or make-up. It is likely that Ahmadinejad will continue to avoid public "morality" crackdowns in order to avoid antagonizing Iranian society at a time when he is seeking to consolidate support. We have heard,

however, of increased attention to conservative dress for women on university campuses. We also continue to hear hints of a more repressive situation for NGOs as a whole, and a government-orchestrated attempt to redefine women's issues as only those related to the family (reftels A and B). Bokaie's prediction of a gradual degradation of women's rights over the next few years seems likely, if events in Iran continue in the current direction. On the other hand, it seems unavoidable that Iran's increasingly well-educated female population will - over time - obtain greater rights.

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